DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 474 579 JC 030 187

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TITLE	Crossing the Finish Line: A Strategic Approach Designed to Help Community College Students Persist and Graduate.
INSTITUTION	Columbus State Community Coll., OH.
PUB DATE	2003-03-18
NOTE	14p.
PUB TYPE	Information Analyses (070) -- Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Academic Persistence; Community Colleges; *Degrees (Academic); *Enrollment Management; Persistence; *School Holding Power; *Student Attrition; Two Year College Students; Two Year Colleges; Withdrawal (Education)
IDENTIFIERS	*Columbus State Community College OH

ABSTRACT

This paper argues that, when trying to calculate the success rates of community college students, the criteria used for reporting graduation rates should differ from those used at four-year institutions. There is no known national standard time-to-degree data available. The reporting window of 150% of minimum time to degree has been arbitrarily assigned, according to the author. Despite the known differences between community colleges and other institutions of higher learning, the same formula is used across the board. The State of Ohio does keep track of state averages for time to degree, and reports these numbers by type of institution. Associate degrees earned in Ohio in 2000-2001 took 4.3 median calendar years to complete, indicating a discrepancy between the national standard and the statewide numbers. At Columbus State Community College (CSCC), the office of Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) has been working on issues related to student retention. SEM instituted the Non-Grad Study to determine whether an intervention program could be developed to assist students who applied to graduate and then did not actually graduate. The study found that 25% of students who applied, but did not graduate were withdrawn for failing or not completing a Capstone course, and 21% were withdrawn for failing or not completing a math course. Results were used to modify the structure of capstone courses. (NB)

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March 17, 2003

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Crossing the Finish Line: A Strategic Approach Designed to Help Community College Students Persist and Graduate

Abstract: An overview of the institutional identity of community colleges, and a discussion of how graduation rates are determined and reported per federal guidelines provides the framework for a project developed to support community college students who are approaching graduation. Using Strategic Enrollment Management principles, Columbus State Community College is identifying reasons students are removed from the graduation roster before graduating. Intervention strategies are being developed to assist this population of students graduate.

Introduction

The Institutional Identity of Community Colleges

Defining student success at the community college is as complex and diverse as the students who choose to attend these institutions. Community colleges, specifically those with open admissions policies serve every type of student from the well prepared high school graduate to the under-prepared high school graduate, from the academically gifted to the academically at risk, from the high school student taking a few courses, to the senior citizen interested in personal enrichment. This makes the student body at any given community college remarkably complex (McCabe, 1999). This also creates unique challenges for those that are interested in trying to understand student persistence and retention in the community college setting.

The accomplishment of graduating with a college degree is a highly desirable asset in today's world. If graduation were the only measure of student retention, then keeping track of retention would be easy. Yet countless students who attend community colleges have no intention of ever graduating with an associate degree. Many students plan to simply take a few courses and then transfer to a four-year school. Others may intend to graduate but end up either transferring out early, or not completing their program of study for a variety of reasons

A significant question remains unanswered regarding student retention. What is the educational intent of community college students? Are community college students meeting their goals? Is graduation always the ultimate goal of higher education? Is graduation a true measure of success at the community college? To fully appreciate the challenges community colleges face in terms of defining and influencing student retention, it is first important to discuss and understand the unique identity of the community college in the higher education market. Student retention is by no means ever easy to understand, and the dynamic and diverse nature of the community college makes understanding retention even more complex. Understanding why students persist and graduate from community colleges is a question that merits exploration.

Community colleges exist to serve students and enhance the educational opportunities in the communities they support. This creates a campus culture that is geared toward teaching and learning. What seems to set community colleges apart from other institutions of higher education is the focus on service (Roueche & Roueche, 2000). A service orientation is reflected in campus cultures that value teaching and learning as a

primary mission of the institution. The essence of campus culture can be captured in the creation of a precise mission statement. Charlene Nunley, president of Montgomery Community College suggested that a mission directs the tone and purpose of an institution (Nunley, 2001). The mission statement at Montgomery begins with "We are in the business of changing lives"(Nunley, 2001).

The mission statement of Columbus State Community College, in Columbus, Ohio opens with a statement to serve the life long learning needs of its community. In other words, two-year community colleges have unique and established identities that are markedly different from that of four-year institutions. In short, community colleges are focused on teaching and learning, and ultimately student achievement in whatever form that may take.

Despite the role that community colleges play in the higher education arena, many of the current means of reporting data regarding enrollment patterns is not community college specific. For example, the same criterion is used to determine graduation rates at both two-year and four year institutions. A review of the federal formula for reporting graduation rates at institutions of higher learning illustrates the incongruence between the reality of the community college experience and this standard of measure.

Making Sense of the Federal Reporting Guidelines for Graduation Rates

According to the Ohio Board of Regents Higher Education Information Report (HEI), the federal formula for determining graduation rates requires the identifying and tracking of a cohort of degree seeking, full-time freshman and reporting the percentage of those students who go on to graduate within 150% of the minimum time to degree

(Higher Education Information Report [HEI], 2003). This approach to reporting graduation rates is used for both four-year and two year institutions respectively. What this translates into is that students pursuing four-year degrees are tracked for six years and students pursuing two-year degree are tracked for 3 years. Interestingly, there is no known actual national standard time to degree data available (HEI, 2003). The reporting window has been arbitrarily assigned and despite the known differences between community colleges and other institutions of higher learning, the same formula is used across the board. The assumption is that it should take no longer than 3 years to earn an associate degree and no longer than 6 years to earn a baccalaureate degree.

In fact, what seems to be happening is that because of the transient, diverse and complex nature of the students who attend community colleges, the reported graduation rates for community colleges are significantly lower than those of four-year colleges and universities (HEI, 2003). Essentially what happens is that graduation rates at two-year community colleges appear alarmingly low. For example, Columbus State Community College reported a 10% institutional graduation rate based on the 1998 cohort (HEI, 2003).

Interestingly, the State of Ohio does keep track of state averages for time to degree and does report these numbers by type of institution. The Ohio Board of Regents Higher Education Information Report states that for associate degrees earned in the 2000-2001 academic year it took 3.8 median calendar years to complete. Baccalaureate degrees took 4.3 median calendar years to complete (HEI, 2003). The time to degree data that Ohio tracks illustrates the discrepancy between the national standard and the

statewide numbers. The federal government is in the process of gathering graduation rate data and this information will be available in subsequent years (HEI, 2003). It is important to point out that this paper is in no way attempting to influence the national reporting standard. Rather, it is an approach to clarify those factors that can influence student persistence, and to open a discussion regarding finding creative solutions for community colleges to define graduation rates.

Factors that Influence Credit Hours to Degree

The Higher Education Report (HEI) suggests many factors can influence the time it takes for a student to obtain a degree and many factors are beyond the control of an institution. Some of those factors considered beyond the control of an institutions include students who arrive at college under-prepared, students who pursue their degrees part-time, students who change majors, transfer students, and students who many opt to pursue a dual degree or extend their studies through work-study experience (HEI, 2003). In other words, each of these scenarios can potentially increase a students' time to degree causing students to fall out of the cohort that is tracked for reporting purposes. Community college students are often working full or part- time many are adult re-entry or non-traditional students who may return to college with credits for prior learning. Community college students are by far non-traditional. In fact, just 17% of today's college students are considered "traditional" (Smith, 2002). If community colleges are to remain open admission institutions dedicated to service, these factors will continue to influence time to degree.

While the above factors are beyond the control of the institution, other factors that influence time-to-degree may be within the control of an institution. These factors include academic planning and counseling, prerequisite requirements, and the setting of a minimum number of credits hours to degree (HEI, 2003). If all of these factors are within the control of any given institution it would follow that programs could be planned with the intent of directly influencing any one of these factors. Additionally, because of their unique and constantly emerging identities, community colleges must continually develop new and more accurate ways of describing themselves. Therefore, the key to both developing systems that can influence student persistence and describing the impact of these systems, is gaining a clear understanding of what is going on with students in the key areas where institutions can have influence.

Methodology

Strategic Enrollment Management

At Columbus State Community College, the office of Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) is charged with developing comprehensive campus wide strategies that produce measurable changes in student recruitment and retention. The (SEM) initiative on campus started in 1997 when a cross functional committee formed to explore issues of recruitment and retention at the college. The original team consisted of faculty, staff, students and administrators from every part of campus. A strategic plan was written, submitted to the college President, and granted approval for implementation. It became apparent that the college would need to secure additional funding in order to fully implement some of these plans. In October of 1999, the college was awarded a

Title III Grant to fund this plan. Since that time, the office of Strategic Enrollment Management (SEM) has been working on issues related to student retention. Key issues are identified and projects chosen based on an enrollment management funnel model. The SEM funnel is a graphical representation of how learners at an institution proceed through a series of check- points (see figure I.). Enrollment data can be gathered at each level. At each of these levels or checkpoints, key performance indicators (KPI's) are identified. KPI's are those factors that are important to all stakeholders of an institution. KPI's can include student head counts, financial aid disbursements, graduation rates, or

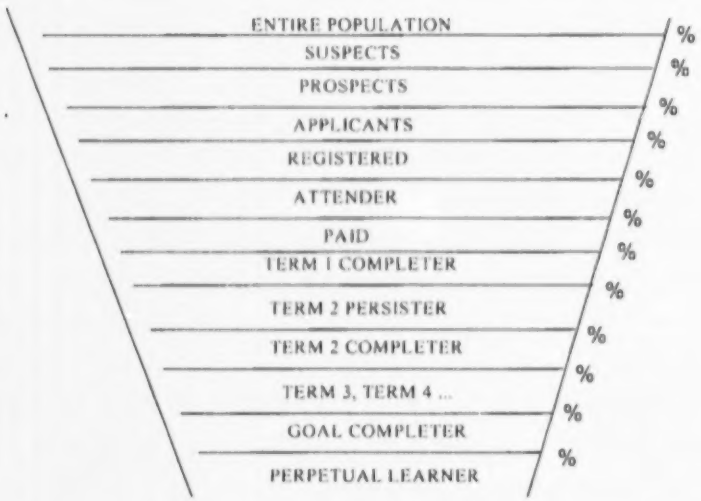

Figure I. The SEM Funnel.

any other quantifiable benchmark data that can be compared to data obtained after strategic plans are implemented (Hamberg & Rezin, 2000).

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The funnel provides the framework for the institution to implement and monitor change (Hamberg & Rezin, 2000; Crockett, 2001). The graphical representation enables the planning team to utilize data that can be gathered at each checkpoint to measure the impact of selected retention activities. For example an institution can implement an activity intended to increase the number of students who register for classes for a second quarter. These students correspond to the term one completer level in the funnel. By comparing the number of term one completers before and after the activity is implemented, the overall impact of the activity can be measured. Thus, activities are planned to support student enrollment and ultimately influence student retention at each phase of the funnel.

The Non-Grad Project

One of the activities planned to support student retention at Columbus state Community college is a project that has been named the Non-Grad Study. Could an SEM activity influence the graduation rate? The question was raised when an observation was made that every quarter a significant number of students submitted petitions to graduate but then did not follow through and actually graduate. We needed to find out why they were not graduating. Could an intervention strategy be developed to assist this population of students? The Non Grad project was implemented to pinpoint the reasons why students who indicated a clear intent to graduate fail to do so, and to identify and implement strategies so that these students could cross the finish line and graduate. What the study has dóne is shed light on several processes that were in place at Columbus State and served as a catalyst to developing some proactive strategies aimed at early

intervention. Following is a brief history of how the project was started, what we found, and where the project is headed.

The first step in creating the Non-Grad initiative on campus was to form a cross-functional work team. This included members of the SEM staff as well as the graduation coordinator from the office of Records and Registration. The initial plan involved reviewing petitions that had been withdrawn from the graduation roster. The cross functional team wished to find a way to gather some of the actual reasons students were removed from the roster. It was suspected that students might stop out at this point due to reasons such as financial aid, low grade point average, or early transfer to a four- year institutions. Findings suggest quite a different set of reasons.

Results

The project team came together in November of 2000 to plan the activity. It was decided that the first step was to review the petitions that had been removed from the roster each quarter for the 2000 calendar year. This review illuminated several patterns that emerged in terms of the types of course work that seemed to present obstacles for students. Most significant in these finding was that certain types of courses seemed to recur more frequently than others on the removed petitions. The types of courses that seemed to be the most problematic for students were math, and our second year capstone course. In fact, preliminary findings suggested that a full 25% of the students who petitioned were withdrawn for failing, or not completing a Capstone course, and 21% were withdrawn for failing or not completing a math course. An access database was developed to track this information beginning in the summer of 2001. This information

was shared with the Academic Deans and our Counseling Center and communications strategies regarding the capstone course were initiated.

As a result, information about how to set up the Capstone course was improved through a collaborative effort with the Arts and Science division and the Counseling Center. More detailed information about how to set up a Capstone course was made available on the web as well as in the counseling center. Interestingly, recent data suggests that there has been a reduction in the number of students in the Non-Grad database due to either failing or not completing a Capstone course. Advisors were made aware of the high numbers of students not graduating due to math. While no direct intervention was implemented regarding math, this information certainly adds weight to the wisdom of advising students to schedule math early in their academic plan. Another trend has begun to emerge in the database. Students are not completing (failing or withdrawing) some of the high level courses in some of the Career and Technical divisions. One course in particular, a second year Business Management course, seems to be problematic for many students. Much like the capstone course, this Business Management course requires a significant amount of independent work on the part of the student.

The information captured in the database is useful in terms of quantifying reasons and adding evidence to support change initiatives. At this time, the project is raising as many questions as illuminating areas for improvement. In addition to the advising interventions, a communication to students called the Graduation Survival guide is being

developed, additional communication pieces regarding graduation are in the works, and a committee reviewing the entire process has been convened. What is significant here is that by taking a closer look at what is happening with this population of Columbus State students, we discovered that it is both appropriate and important to develop advising strategies for students preparing to exit our institution. The fact is that it is doubtful that these interventions will directly affect our graduation rates, as the federal reporting standard does not fit well with the reality of our students. The benefit of keeping track of this type of information is that we can know our students more fully, and that we can develop strategies for support that are within the control of the institution. If the over-arching goal is student success, then by seeking solutions to help students cross the finish line and graduate, we are living our institutional mission.

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